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ABSTRACT

Any discussion about present-day involvement in political and civic life in Romania raises challenging questions, for example, the kind of democracy they have and how power relates to public life involvement needs to be examined. Another question is how an all-out education reform can help build a mentality of positive involvement. A 2-year opinion survey for students and professors early on elicited answers about human rights education which persistently ignored the ideas of influencing public decision-making and involvement in community life. Two years later the attitude of participants had changed appreciably, and reference to involvement and civic participation was expressed more often. An interactive teaching approach assisted and promoted by purposefully designed materials and teacher training classes may have brought about the change. The project showed what the prevailing political mentality of the ordinary Romanian citizen was like in 1994-96 and the "wonders" that a specific educational approach can work in a rather short time. For a society in transition from totalitarianism to a democratic political system set on the tenets and mechanisms of modern liberal democracy, the rule of law and free market economics, the human rights issue, and liberal democratic values are a multi-faceted challenge. In Romania's schools and universities an apparent tension exists between what is referred to as civic identity, ethnic identity, and human rights universality. As of the 1998-99 school year a new curriculum framework has taken effect which should help bring respect for the dignity of students and teachers (and parents) and a school-designed and developed social practice that is efficient in a democratic sense. (Contains 4 references.) (BT)

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CONTEMPORARY INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL AND CIVIC LIFE: TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE ROMANIAN CASE

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Contemporary Involvement in Political and Civic Life:

Trends and Implications of the Romanian Case

By Dakmara Georgescu

Any discussion about present-day involvement in political and civic life raises challenging questions. In the Romanian case, such questions are:

- What kind of democracy do we have in Romania now?
- How does power, with its many facets, relate to public life involvement–one way or another?
- Who are those excluded from power, hence from involvement?
- What makes them so?
- What instances of good and bad involvement in Romania today can be given?
- What tendencies should be supported?
- How can an all-out education reform such as minister Andrei Marga launched in December 1997 help build a mentality of positive involvement? (Of course, this is not an exhaustive list.)

The motto of this paper, "to have the power", is taken from an excerpted discussion between L. I. Brezhnev and a party activist who, as a pensioner of power, reminisced on his former life. Brezhnev asked him "to intervene" for someone, in the spirit of communist corruption. The activist tried to sidestep the question as he referred to the highest-level-of-power–highest-level-of-intervention relationship. While the case is certainly relevant for "negative" intervention which contributes very little, if at all, to the public good, it also summarizes the essence of widespread authoritarian-bred mentality which still lingers in the

former communist countries: he who has the power–that is all the power in the state–can influence the course of events, his own life and the lives of others, the progress of society, of the economy.

A Human Rights Education in Romanian Schools Project undertaken jointly with the Romanian Institute for Education Sciences and the Helsinki Committee of the Netherlands during 1994-1997 included a two-year opinion survey as part of which students and professors completed a panel questionnaire at the beginning and end of the school year. Interestingly and significantly, early in the life of the project, the answers to the questions on what makes a good citizen persistently ignored the ideas of influencing public decision-making and involvement in community life. In the opinion of respondents, a "good citizen" was above all one who loved one's country, abided by its laws. A few moral features were generally added such as honesty, fairness, diligence, etc.

Two years later the attitude of project participants–students and professors–had changed appreciably, as reference to involvement and civic participation was expressed more often. That change of mentality may have partly been brought by the strongly interactive approach introduced by the project in the grades concerned. An interactive teaching approach assisted and promoted by purposefully designed materials and teacher training classes that opened up avenue unknown and unused before.

The project taught us two things: a) what the prevailing political mentality of the ordinary Romanian citizen was like in 1994-1996; and b) the "wonders" that a specific educational approach can work in a rather short time. Certainly, changes of mentality or attitude stand little chance of taking root in the absence of a conducive environment. While it is true that there may

be students or professors who see things differently or think of citizenship in different terms, the path to civic skepticism would lie wide open should their attempts to become somehow involved end in failure.

I believe that, inasmuch as political and civic involvement is concerned, the key issues to Romania are just two:

- How can citizens realize what their true role is in a truly liberal democracy?
- How can the change of mentality–in the happy event that this does happen–be sustained by institutional mechanisms and public behaviors that set an example and have an impact like those of people in high public offices who exercise their power at central and local level.

Romania and Minimal Democracy:

A minimal understanding of democracy is to reduce this type of political regime to voting as a peaceful mechanism for the change of power every couple of years. The remark that it takes at least two peaceful shifts of power to make a strong democracy has been commonplace in political science. (Romania experienced a violent (blood-letting) change of power in 1989 and a "peaceful" change in 1996, when the democratic opposition defeated the coalition of "leftist" forces–successors in one way or another to the ex-Communist Party that ruled the country from 1990 to 1996.

However, voting only involves the citizens in what is referred to as "the positive dimension" of power. A far closer involvement, in my view, is their involvement in the "negative" dimension of power, in the citizen-official "contractual" relationship, which implies power control, the attempt to influence public decision-making, a critical exercise through the media above all, and not least the ability to <u>understand</u>, hence to react to political and legal discourse–written or

spoken.

Recent political analytical studies have shown that, notwithstanding institutional changes of a democratic type, "democracy" as such is still minimal in Romania. It is not strong enough, it still has totalitarian ingredients; there is a government "gap" (which shows in the extension of the underground economy, crime rings, and corruption); many malformations of Romania's political party system (political parties lack doctrinal identity, they try to recover the past, indulge in cheap theatricals, and provide, by their structure and operation, the necessary conditions for free elections but not sufficient conditions for these elections to be truly competitive).

According to the same studies, Romania is still waiting for political life to emerge:

- Civil society is little involved.
- There are non-democratic mentalities and behaviors (a collectivist mentality prevails, autonomy is undermined by dependence, labeling is substituted for judgment, the meaning of equality is distorted, individualism largely amounts to plain selfishness, free-man and civic mentalities are yet to become prevalent, there is an obsession of conspiracy as an ideology of non-democracy).
- The poor are the most excluded among those excluded from civic life (poverty is an obstacle to democracy, government is not an issue for the man in the street).
- Women are the big absence from public life (to them, freedom is first of all the right/duty to work, women are the "poorest among the poor", men are more equal in rights than women who are overwhelmingly vulnerable to violence, they have access to public offices only as a matter of principle.

For a society in transition from totalitarianism to a democratic political system set on the

tenets and mechanisms of modern liberal democracy, the rule of law and free market economics, the human rights issue, and liberal democratic values are a multi-faceted **challenge**. It is a challenge to **mentalities** as the **covenant spirit** of the human rights "philosophy" and the social and political practices generated by such ideas, by such interpretations of interpersonal relations and citizen-power relations contrast sharply with the still strong remnants of paternalist mentalities.

Generally speaking, the Romanian citizen continues to perceive oneself in very many cases as a subject of public power, not its partner to a contract. The idea and practice of control of public power (or other public authorities) are still far from being commonplace in the minds and actions of people in Romania. So, for instance, there is a great difference between the Romanian citizens and taxpayers and the citizens of the United States or some other western state who in their twofold capacity are concerned to honestly pay their taxes and to monitor by various means how the public money is spent. These ideas and practices that developed into natural public life ingredients in western countries in the last two hundred years are still far from being a natural part of the thought and behavior of public authorities or of the citizens of Romania.

Another major challenge is the flawed, highly bureaucratic way of functioning of public institutions beginning with Parliament whose members are concerned about the sustainability of the power relations they are involved in rather than the public good. Of course, this is not the concern of Central and East European societies alone. The political philosophy and political science literature have extensively signaled the frailty of western democracies eroded by the unrestrained proliferation of bureaucratic and legal procedures that widens the gap between the citizen and political power, in spite of modern communication means, including the Internet. If

two hundred years ago the emerging western democracies were about transparency of legal acts, about legal texts reaching the masses to make the law (the Constitutions, especially the US Constitution) a public good, today the law is increasingly encoded, accessible to just a few, hence the endless potential for manipulation in the name of the law.

In Romania, another serious challenge to liberal democratic values is their **confusing interpretations** by orthodox fundamentalists more particularly. So, for instance, human rights are intentionally assumed to mean only the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, or women's rights to use their bodies as they may choose since this is intended to raise hostility, especially among orthodox believers or uneducated people. If human rights were a **subversive topic** in Romania's ex-communist totalitarian system where the actual meaning of the public rights issue was distorted in the public discourse, they are a "western" threat to present-day orthodox fundamentalism, an imperialist cultural import that seeks to undermine the Romanian people's age-old traditions and Christian orthodox spirituality. In this way, the anti-human rights arguments rooted in Eastern Church Orthodoxism are in line with those of Islamic fundamentalism or Third World intellectuals and/or politicians, which all deny the universal, inalienable and indivisible character of what post-war international documents sanctioned as "human rights".

If western democratic values–participation , involvement, power control, etc.–are put in the **perspective of education**, things are not better either. Many educators are against a pro-rights education and prefer instead to stress the duties and obligations. Civic liberties are wrongly assumed to be tantamount to the threat or effectiveness of libertinism. Student rights are feared to be potential sources of hybris in the school community. These are surely paradoxical situations for a state in the membership of the Council of Europe to which human rights promotion and

observance are an avowed policy and condition for membership. However, we must never forget that the former communist states have still a long way to go before mentalities therein may change. Democratic mechanisms and institutions, important market-economy ingredients, an emerging and in some cases strong civil society, the positive social perception of democracy as a political system are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a strong and deep-rooted democracy where human rights observance goes beyond political rhetoric. If we agree that Francis Fukuyama is right, then it is the **cultural** dimension of democracy that is the key to its strength and stability: what ideas are disseminated in society, which arguments and values are cultivated by society, how people see things, what level of education gives every member of society access to traditional or modern information systems, allows one to understand the public discourse and legal texts, to exercise one's civic rights in a competent and participatory fashion.

In Romania's schools and universities and more broadly in public life one more tension is apparent viz. between what is referred to as civic identity, ethnic identity and human rights universality. Again, this is not specific of Romania alone, yet this adds to the problems of the education system to find the right content and tone of education for democracy. We want hereby to stress that there are in Romania cultural, social, economic and political prerequisites that not always are the most auspicious for a reasonable and efficient approach to education for democracy. In other words, in Romania's democracy today, citizens prefer to be rather a Caesar, as the ordinary citizen status is to them tantamount to "nothing".

Hope Lies in a Thorough Education System Reform

How far has Romania gone in its institutional effort to take education for (participatory) democracy to schools and universities? It should be said that in the early nineties, at the beginning

of transition, democratic values became an issue for a new-type demagogy which showed in its approach by school, too. Many educators confined their so-called teaching of the subject to providing knowledge of the provisions of such international documents as the Universal Human Rights Declaration or the European Convention on Human Rights, or the Constitution of the country. Happily, many schools and universities opened up to NGOs representatives and programs which brought a new approach to formal human rights education. Many of those programs benefitted from western **methodological expertise** in teacher training, designing of teaching aids for various age groups, development of a participatory approach in class and a new atmosphere in schools and universities apt to provide for the real observance of the rights of the children and young people. As of the 1995-96 school year, new school programs were introduced in primary education along with alternative manuals of civic education, the curriculum for this subject significantly shifted its stress to the development of children's critical thinking, pro-democratic behaviors, communication and relational skills along with those for competent participation in a dialogue, in decision-making, in the election of leaders, etc. It was the time (1995-97) when a Human Rights Education in Romania's Schools project was implemented under the joint coordination of the Institute of Education Sciences and the Helsinki Committee of the Netherlands. Under the Project, school programs and alternative school books used by 200 schools across the country proposed that Romania's civic education standards, institutions and mechanisms be underpinned by the "universal" values, tenets and practices specific of "human rights" and promoted by an **interactive teaching approach**.

Human rights as **an ideal projection of the citizen-power relations** so as it is currently **sanctioned (encoded)** by international documents certainly differs from what schoolchildren

know from experience in their own communities about the observance of those rights. The reason behind the approach was to get the schoolchildren to imagine solutions and think of cases when they were to act as citizens in order that the ideal–both positive and negative–human rights perspective have its counterpart in one's real life. The two-year project had a great impact on teacher training and the change of mentality. While early in the project, 85 percent of the interviewed students and professors made no connection whatsoever between influencing public decision-making or participation in community life and "good citizenship", by the end of the project that had changed. The final questionnaires evinced a definite change of the meaning of citizenship to imply participation, personal involvement in public work starting from the idea that democracy is not something to be taken for granted, but a construct, something to be built and improved steadily.

As of the 1998-99 school year a new curriculum framework has taken effect: it is more of an outline curriculum framework that will give schools more possibilities than so far to adjust to local conditions, to the needs and interests of schoolchildren and students. In a departure from the hitherto student overload, the new Outline Framework gives students more free time and the possibility to opt for different school tracks as early as the lower grades. We hope this new system-regulating Plan may usher in a new style of work in school where the child is to be valued as a person in the best acceptance of human rights viz. equality in dignity of all humans. We also hope this new Outline Framework along with other actions (concerning school assessment and management) will eventually change the current teacher-pupil/student relationship, bring respect for the dignity of pupils/students and teachers, or parents, and a school-designed and developed social practice that is efficient in a democratic sense.

A school or university organized in disregard of the dignity of the persons involved in its everyday activity (students, parents but also teachers) has no reason to live on. Seen this way, the effort to really reform Romania's education system–whatever the costs and controversial arguments–is more than necessary and possible. It actually is the key to a strong democracy for, in our opinion, in Romania, like elsewhere in the world, democracy takes its strength not only from the economy. It is the motivation of people, their pro-social attitudes and confidence in the future that make a strong democracy. The young people's confidence supported by arguments in the possibility to build a society on liberal democratic values, tenets and practice as a result of school organization and functioning may be a good start for such building work.

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